MY NAME IS EMILIA DEL VALLE

ISABEL ALLENDE

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH
BY FRANCES RIDDLE

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THE DAY I TURNED SEVEN YEARS OLD, APRIL 14, 1873, my mother, Molly Walsh, dressed me in my Sunday best and brought me to Union Square to have my portrait taken. The only existing photograph of my childhood depicts me standing beside a harp with the terrified expression of a man on the gallows, a result of the long minutes spent staring into the black box of the camera, holding my breath, followed by the startle of the flashbulb. I should clarify that I do not know how to play any instrument; the harp was merely one of the dusty theatrical props crowded into the photography studio alongside cardboard columns, Chinese vases, and a stuffed horse.

The photographer was a small mustachioed Dutchman who had made a good living at his trade since the times of the gold rush when the miners came down from the mountains to deposit their nuggets in the banks and have their portraits taken to send home to their all-but-forgotten families. Gold fever soon died down, but San Francisco's upper-class patrons still frequented the studio to pose for posterity. My family didn't fall into that category, but my mother had her own reasons for wanting a photo of her daughter. She haggled on the price of the portrait, more on principle than out of real necessity; I've never

known her to purchase anything without attempting to obtain a discount.

"While we're here, we'll go and see the head of Joaquín Murieta," she told me as we left the Dutchman's studio.

At the opposite end of the square, near the entrance to Chinatown, she bought me a cinnamon roll and led me to the door of an unsanitary tavern. We paid the entrance fee and traversed a long hallway to the rear of the locale. There, a scary thug lifted a heavy curtain and we entered a room hung with lugubrious draperies and lit with altar candles like some ghastly church. There was a table shrouded in black cloth at one end of the space and atop it sat two large glass jars. I cannot recall any further details of the décor because I was paralyzed by fright. My mother seemed euphoric even as I quaked with fear, both hands clutching at her skirts. The first jar held a human hand floating in a yellowish liquid. The second, a man's decapitated head with the eyelids sewn shut, lips pulled back, teeth barred, and hair standing on end.

"Joaquín Murieta was a bandit. A reprobate, like your father. This is how bandits usually end up," my mother explained.

It goes without saying that I suffered horrible nightmares that night. I was even feverish, but my mother was of the opinion that unless a person was bleeding, there was no need to intervene. The following day, wearing the same dress and the same cursed lace-up boots that pinched terribly, since I had been forcing my feet into them for the past two years, we picked up my portrait and walked to the wealthy part of town, a neighborhood I had never set foot in before. Cobbled streets wended their way up the hills flanked by stately homes overlooking rose gardens and tidily trimmed hedges, coach houses stocked with glossy horses, not a single beggar in sight.

Up to that point, my entire existence had transpired within the confines of the Mission District, that multicolored, polyglot multitude of emigrants from Germany, Ireland, and Italy; Mexicans who had always lived in California; and a considerable cohort of Chileans

who came with the gold rush in 1848 and, several decades later, were still as poor as when they had first arrived. They never saw any gold. If they did find anything in the mines, it was snatched from them by the whites who arrived a year later. Many returned to their homeland with nothing more than fabulous tales to tell. Others stayed because the return trip was long and costly. The Mission District was bursting with factories, workshops, piles of rubbish, stray dogs, skinny mules, clotheslines, and doors thrown open wide because there was nothing of value to steal.

That pilgrimage with my mother to the restricted universe of the upper class was my first hint that we were poor. We were far from hungry and plagued by rodents, like my maternal grandparents in Ireland, but we led a modest lifestyle like everyone else around us, who lived hand to mouth. I had never paid any mind to people of greater means before because I had never had any contact with them. I had seen them from afar when I went downtown with my parents, but that seldom happened. The coaches pulled by lustrous horses; ladies in exaggerated Victorian fashions festooned with ruffles, fringe, and rosettes; gentlemen with their top hats and canes; and children dressed in sailor suits were creatures of another species. Our working-class neighborhood was filled with barefoot children, eternally pregnant women, and drunken men working odd jobs to scrape together enough money for bread. Compared to our neighbors, my small family was fortunate. My honorable stepfather always said that as long as we had work, love, and dignity, we should want for nothing. We also had a decent little home, and we were not indebted to anyone.

I didn't dare ask my mother where we were going. I followed her up and down the hills, enduring the blisters on my feet. At that time, Molly Walsh was a young woman with an angelic face, that is to say, with the beatific expression of church martyrs, and the crystal clear voice of a mockingbird, which she still retains. That voice is deceptive, however, because my mother is actually quite forceful and bossy. On the rare occasion that she has cause to mention my father, her

voice changes and her singsong tone becomes halting as she spits out her words. She hadn't said it, but I guessed that this torturous walk to the wealthy area of town was somehow related to him.

Finally, we reached the top of Nob Hill, panting from the effort, and took in the panoramic view of the city and San Francisco Bay. We came to a stop in front of the most imposing mansion on the street, with a marvelous garden hemmed in by a monumental iron fence. Through the bars, I glimpsed a statue of a fish shooting water from its mouth into a stone fountain. At the end of the garden an enormous butter-colored house rose up with a columned porch and a heavy wooden door flanked by two stone lions. My mother said it was a nouveau riche eyesore, but my mouth hung agape; this must be what a fairy-tale palace looked like. We stood before the iron gate for a few minutes catching our breath, as my mother dabbed sweat from her brow and straightened her hat. Before she could pull the cord to ring the bell, a man stepped out from a side door, dressed in a black suit with a starched collar. He crossed the vast expanse of garden and stopped before us. He did not open the gate. A mere glance was all it took for him to accurately size us up despite the care my mother had taken with our appearance.

"How may I help you, madam?" he asked in a haughty British accent, his lips so tight we could hardly understand him.

"I am here to speak with Mr. Gonzalo Andrés del Valle," my mother declared, trying to imitate the man's petulant tone.

"Do you have an appointment with Mr. del Valle?"

"No, but he'll see me."

"I am afraid he is traveling at the moment, madam."

"When will he return?" my mother asked, somewhat deflated.

"I couldn't say, madam."

The man stared at us for a moment and finally opened the gate, but he did not invite us in. I suppose he had reached the conclusion that we did not pose any real threat or major nuisance, because he took on a slightly more friendly tone.

"Mr. del Valle visits San Francisco from time to time, but he resides in Chile," the Englishman explained before adding that the family did not accept visitors without previous appointments.

"Could you provide an address where I can send him a letter? It's a very important matter," my mother said.

"You can leave it with me, Mrs. . . ."

"Molly Walsh," she replied, without mentioning her married name, Claro.

"I will personally see that it reaches him, Mrs. Walsh," he assured her.

She then handed the man an envelope containing my photograph and a note introducing Gonzalo Andrés del Valle to his daughter, Emilia. This was not the last letter she would write to him, nor was it the first.

I GREW UP being told that my father was a very wealthy Chilean and that I had a claim to a certain inheritance. Destiny had stolen my birthright from me but God, in His infinite mercy, would place it in my path in due time. Our present economic hardship was merely a test handed down from heaven to teach me humility; the future would hold great rewards as long as I remained obedient and virtuous, something measured in virginity and modesty, because nothing offends God more than a brazen woman. At mass and in my nightly prayers kneeling before my bed, my mother had me ask God to soften the hearts of those indebted to us and to pardon them to the extent that they repaid their debts. It would be several years before I understood that this Byzantine prayer was a reference to my father.

In truth, my childhood was perfect. My mother fussed over me, but she was very busy and couldn't watch me too closely. My stepfather believed his perfect princess to be utterly incapable of misbehavior and he left me to my own devices as well. He was right. I was an introverted child, an avid reader, solitary and sensitive by nature and

content to entertain myself. I was never a nuisance at all, that is until the strong gale of adolescence churned me up into a true harpy. Fortunately, that phase did not last long. The economic hardship my mother referred to in our nightly prayers was irrelevant to me, because no one around us had more abundance than we did. As for my hypothetical inheritance, I saw it for what it was—a fairy tale—and I was careful never to mention it to anyone we knew because they would have found it laughable. More than anything, I was terrified by the thought that my mysterious Chilean father, a bandit like Joaquín Murieta, might one day appear to claim me as his daughter and whisk me away to some far-off land. I couldn't bear the thought of being separated from my mother and Francisco Claro, who was and always will be my only father, even if we do not share the same blood.

But I had better tell the story in its proper order, to avoid confusion. I shall start with my mother, because, to explain who I am, I have to go back to her and my stepfather, whom I have always called Papo.

Molly Walsh, my mother, was born in New York, daughter of Irish immigrants who came to America fleeing the potato famine. In 1849, when her father heard that the streets of California were paved with gold, he joined the caravan of prospectors crossing the continent from east to west with hopes of striking it rich. One of his four children died along the way and was left behind in a small unmarked grave. A few months after arriving in the nascent, chaotic city of San Francisco, his wife died of consumption. That woman, my grandmother, heroically endured the long, terrible months of travel, trudging onward for the sake of her remaining children, but her strength and courage were not enough to prolong her existence once they reached California, land of crude, opportunistic people. One day, during a violent fit of bloody coughing, her heart stopped.

Her widower, my grandfather, suddenly found himself alone with three children in an inhospitable city, and he understood that he could not care for them properly if he aimed to fulfill his dream of finding

gold. He took the oldest son, who was twelve, with him into the hills, placed the second as an indentured servant, and left Molly, age four, at an orphanage founded by three Mexican nuns, with the promise that he would return for her as soon as he obtained the fortune he was after. That never happened.

AS A YOUNG girl, Molly was submissive and pious, seeming to delight in sacrifice and suffering. This is what Papo has told me anyway, but it is hard to imagine it seeing the warrior woman she is today, capable of leading street protests and, armed with her rolling pin, facing down any drunk, bandit, cop, or other scoundrel making trouble in our neighborhood. Little Molly spent so many hours on her knees, fasted with such fervor, and accepted the mockery of her peers with such resignation that she was dubbed "Saint Molly" by the other orphans. The two younger nuns, simple women, favored her over all the other girls, moved by the thought of a budding saint in their midst. At first, Mother Rosario, the leader of that tiny religious order, paid no attention to Molly's exaggerated devotion and the other nuns' desperate hopes; her pupils, all orphaned or abandoned girls, often displayed strange conduct. The mother superior was forced to intervene, however, when, at age eleven, young Molly began to have visions and hear voices. That was taking it a step too far. Mother Rosario felt that saintliness was fine for women of leisure but it had no place there, where a love of God was demonstrated through hard work. She believed there to be a very fine line between celestial communion and mental illness and so set about curing Molly's miracles through baths of cold water and geranium oil. She forced my mother to eat three meals daily, closely guarded to ensure she swallowed every bite and kept it down. She put her to work in the garden with a shovel and hoe, at the washing troughs and the bread oven, had her scrub the floor with bleach. Between the daily dishes of beans and rice and the sweat of hard work, the girl sailed through the difficult years

of puberty with a certain normalcy, but she always maintained her inclination toward melodrama. Her father and brothers never returned for her or even sent news and so she eventually accepted that those three good sisters were her only family. She was now too busy to find creative ways of imitating the martyrs from the calendar of saints, but her religious fervor remained unwavering and at age fifteen she begged to be accepted as a novice.

And that is how Molly Walsh was blessed enough to don the rough white habit of the novice nuns. Her hair was shorn off like an inmate and she joined the small circle of women who had raised her, prepared to give herself over, body and soul, to charity. She would've preferred to enter a cloistered convent, some austere, medieval fortress made of icy stone where spiked belts were employed to punish the flesh, sleeping on the hard ground with a log for a pillow and fasting to the point of collapse. Instead, she had to make do with a more agreeable existence in the large adobe house of the orphanage, where the bunk beds had horsehair mattresses and the food was simple but plentiful. The mother superior, whose healthy appetite manifested in the contours of her hips and the rolls on her waist that her loose habit was unable to dissimulate, was of the belief that the body should be well nourished in order to better serve the Lord in strength and good health.

BY AGE SEVENTEEN, Molly was ready to exercise the calling she'd been trained for: serving and educating. There was much work to be done at the orphanage, but Mother Rosario thought it best for her pupil to move down out of the clouds and into the real world so that she could acquire a bit of common sense and put her calling to the test. She suspected that the girl had a bonfire raging inside, so fierce that no religious habit would be able to contain it.

The world that the mother superior was referring to was limited to the Mission District, which took its name from the first Franciscan

mission founded in the eighteenth century. San Francisco's large Mexican population was concentrated here. Mere days after the discovery of gold, the shameful Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, putting an end to the war and ceding more than half of the Mexican territory, including California, to the United States. The better part of the old Mexican haciendas were expropriated and the campesinos, who had lived on the land for generations, were expelled from their homes. Some futilely chased the illusion of gold, others became bandits, and the rest got by the best they could. Growing up there, we knew that certain neighbors earned their living as highwaymen, robbing travelers on the roads, but as long as they respected the people of the Mission District, no one would turn them in. More than once the neighbors had hidden them during a police raid because they knew they would be later compensated with favors or an interest-free loan in a time of need. No one trusted the bankers, who were the true thieves.

Molly Walsh got a job as a teacher in a little school by the pompous name of Aztec Pride. It consisted of a one-room adobe schoolhouse with a thatched roof where the students, all boys between the ages of six and seventeen, crowded in. The lessons were dictated in Spanish, but there were two Irish kids and one black boy, the grandson of slaves whose family had escaped the Civil War in Alabama. All three learned Spanish quickly. The modest space included two long tables flanked by mismatched stools and chairs donated from the neighborhood, a wood-burning stove in one corner to combat the damp fog and to fry eggs, a cupboard for school supplies, and a latrine outside in the yard. There was also a henhouse that provided the eggs for the boys' lunch, because many of them were sent to school on an empty stomach. There were still some powerful Mexican families in California, but their sons were educated in Catholic schools far from the Mission District. The students of Aztec Pride were all poor.

The school's founder, director, and only teacher until Molly's arrival was a mestizo man from Chihuahua named Francisco Claro,

known by everyone as don Pancho. He was a true scholar, a man who had dedicated his life to his studies with the lofty ambition of being able to fathom the universe, life, and death. Nothing escaped his passionate curiosity or his formidable memory. His desire to awaken a thirst for knowledge in his students crashed up against hard reality, because as soon as they had learned the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the boys left school to start work. Rarely did a student stay on for more than a year or two. Even the youngest had to contribute to the family and earn his sustenance.

Don Pancho took in the young novice nun with respectful appreciation. He needed her. With her assistance, he could now separate the students into groups. He divided the one-room schoolhouse using a paper screen painted with scenes of cranes and emperors, purchased in Chinatown, and he dedicated his time to the older boys while she taught the younger ones. He also assigned Molly the unpleasant task of raising funds to support the school through donations from the few Mexicans of good fortune and the wealthy whites eager to appease the guilt that so often accompanies unchecked greed. With her angelic face, soft manners, and novice's habit, her request for charity was hard to deny. Just as Mother Rosario, who was a full-blooded mestiza, had always said, Molly's translucent skin and blue eyes could open many doors that were closed to people of color.

FROM THE START, both Molly's and don Pancho's lives were changed as she saw unexpected horizons open before her and he was able to share his passion for knowledge and education. They worked side by side, arriving at dawn to clean the yard, latrine, and henhouse; at midday they prepared a lunch of tortillas and scrambled eggs for the class; they taught until five in the afternoon and then, after their pupils left, Molly stayed on to study under the maestro's tutelage. That is how she learned of the vast animal world, endless galaxies, the customs of remote cultures, the infallibility of mathematics, and

everything else that her professor considered essential. As far as the evils of the world were concerned, however, she remained as ignorant as she had been among the nuns.

Don Pancho had never had a disciple so eager to learn. He saw Molly as malleable, a smooth blank canvas on which he could leave his mark; he never suspected that beneath her apparent naïveté lay an indestructible willpower. Perhaps she herself did not yet realize it. They very quickly fell into a comfortable working routine and developed an innocent master-apprentice relationship. This made Mother Rosario breathe easy at leaving the novice to spend so much time alone in the company of a man. The director of Aztec Pride was not known to be given to the vices of alcohol, gambling, fighting, or women, and he didn't seem to like men either. In fact, it was rumored that he'd lost his balls in the Battle of Chapultepec, where he had fought at age twenty-one, not out of patriotic fervor, as he himself admitted, but because he was recruited into Santa Anna's army at the tip of a bayonet. He believed that only murderous madmen went to war voluntarily.

The religious habit that covered Molly from head to toe concealed the shape of her body, but it did not cover her pretty face. My mother has the type of skin, luminous in youth, that blushes with any emotion but does not stand up to the passage of time. She has the straight nose of a classical statue, a small mouth, childlike dimples, a cleft chin, and eyes of an intense lapis lazuli, which have not faded with age. Not a single strand of her hair was visible under her tight headpiece, but from the color of her skin and eyes one would've guessed that she was blond. She wasn't. Under her veil, my mother's black hair was regularly shorn off with scissors. If don Pancho was ever tempted to admire her feminine attributes, he immediately discarded the notion. Her habit was a carapace; Molly Walsh was untouchable. Even though he considered himself a bitter enemy of all religion, he exalted the young novice nun, as sacred as the Virgen de Guadalupe.

Three years went by in this way, the two of them enjoying schol-

arship, hard work, and camaraderie as the day when Molly would take her vows and become a nun drew near. Mother Rosario had decreed that the ceremony would take place in December, when they would be blessed by a visit from a Mexican bishop who was making the rounds to all the churches and parishes of California. It would be a solemn occasion celebrated within the orphanage's dignified poverty.

MOLLY WALSH NEVER became a nun, however. Any illusions of sainthood she might've harbored in her youth were dashed in a few days' time by a young Chilean gentleman of considerable fortune, striking good looks, and scant scruples. His name was Gonzalo Andrés del Valle. He was my father, or so I've been told. The man set his sights on the novice nun, enchanted by her beautiful face and graceful stride, deducing that under that horrendous habit lay an appealing figure. I don't know where they met; maybe she was knocking on the doors of the Nob Hill mansions with her little basket asking for donations and he saw her there. Whatever the case, the Chilean man, accustomed to satisfying his every whim, decided he would have her. The nun's habit, far from dissuading him, was an incentive.

I'll never know how he managed to seduce that devout zealot of a girl who viewed almost everything as an unspeakable sin and lived in fear of God's implacable wrath, but the fact is that she fell into his trap like a hypnotized rabbit. Maybe he did not even need to employ any complex persuasion tactics; it was enough to simply awaken the desire for love that she bore within her like a slumbering volcano. I don't know where they committed the act that gave rise to my existence. And I refer to it in the singular because I imagine that, after his successful conquest, del Valle immediately lost interest.

Of course, none of this was relayed to me by my mother, but it's easy enough to imagine since I know her so well. Stripped of her habit, Molly was even more beautiful than the Chilean had imagined,

despite the fact that her shaven skull gave her the appearance of a lunatic, but she was prudish to an extreme, overemotional, and melodramatic. The girl was unwilling to participate in any erotic play, the encounter was barely consensual, and the fleeting pleasure of the act soon left him with the bitter taste of guilt over having deceived that bride of Christ. The girl's innocence complicated matters immensely; the last thing he wanted was a hysterical woman who gave herself over to him rigid as a corpse, muttering the Lord's Prayer while bathed in tears, begging God to forgive her as he put his pants back on. He had to be free of her and the most compassionate way to do it was to cut the relationship short in a single blow, like decapitating a chicken. That would quickly convert her passionate love to bitter anger and the girl would soon get over him. His solution was to avoid her at all costs.

Molly Walsh might have been oblivious to the more mundane aspects of existence, but she wasn't stupid and quickly realized that she'd been used and tossed out like an old rag. Through severe fasting, gravel in her shoes, and other mortifications, she tried to atone for her sins and rip that illusion of love out by the roots. She refused to let herself even think of her fugitive lover ever again, and she might have achieved it if I hadn't come into existence.

Several weeks after that rushed carnal tryst, she discovered that she was with child. She took it as a divine punishment, something she always reminded me of whenever I misbehaved: I was not the fruit of love, nor even pleasure, I was a punishment from God. But I never believed her, even as a child, and now that I'm an adult it makes me laugh. Luckily, I had my Papo, who gave me the confidence to march out into the world; according to him I was a gift sent down from heaven. But why waste words on this matter that never really affected me?

Gonzalo Andrés del Valle did not respond to the desperate missives that Molly sent to the mansion on Nob Hill, but she finally managed to corner him outside Sacred Heart Cathedral, where the

wealthier Catholics attended Sunday mass decked out in their finest, to see and be seen. From the back of the nave, she saw him exit the confessional, take communion, and kneel down to pray with theatrical devotion. She waited for him outside, gripped him by the coat, and began rebuking him, red with shame. Several people stopped to gawk at the spectacle; nothing juicier than a scandal among the aristocracy, although, in truth, the del Valles were anything but aristocratic. They were new money, like almost all the wealthy citizens of San Francisco, city of adventurers. He wasn't a native English speaker or a Protestant, he hailed from a land hardly anyone could locate on a map, and therefore he couldn't even aspire to being accepted by the upper crust in the United Sates.

The origin of the del Valle fortune, amassed during the gold rush, was the curious enterprise of shipping food products from Chile to California. Paulina del Valle, the visionary matriarch of the family, had the inspired notion of lining the hull of a ship with chunks of glacier from southern Chile, adding a layer of salt and sawdust, and filling the hold with vegetables, fruit, eggs, smoked meats, sausages, cheeses, and other delicacies. The merchandise then made the two-month journey from Valparaíso to San Francisco, perfectly preserved, and retailed at a price comparable to gold. The leftover ice was later sold in Panama on the way home. This process was repeated over and over with immense profits until other, quicker ships began to compete. Unfortunately, none of doña Paulina's descendants had inherited her enterprising spirit, which soon disappeared from the family line. If I refer to her here, it is because our paths would one day cross. Gonzalo Andrés, her nephew and godson, turned out to be just as lazy and dim-witted as the rest of her cousins and siblings.

That day at the church, Gonzalo Andrés took Molly by the arm, pulling her gruffly away from the exiting flock of parishioners, and accused her of trying to saddle him with a child that did not belong to him. What proof did she have that he was the father? It's true, she

had been a virgin when they lay together—and let's remember that she did so more than willingly—but two months had passed since then, and in that time, she could've had any number of other lovers. If her nun's habit had not kept her from lying with him, why would it impede her from doing the same with other men, he spat in a harsh whisper so that the ever-growing crowd of curious onlookers would not overhear. In an inexplicable impulse, given her fainthearted and submissive nature up to that point, Molly Walsh brusquely wiped the tears from her face and threatened the spineless Chilean with a terrifying, oracular intensity. "No woman will ever love you. You will not be able to bear other children, and you will be thrown headfirst into hell!"

In that moment, the true Molly Walsh, bold and brave, blossomed from beneath the folds of her habit. The young seducer met the sinister prophecy with a mocking laugh, turned his back, and walked away. But, in time, Gonzalo Andrés del Valle would live to see those words cut deep to the bone. He was never able to forget them.

MY MOTHER HID her pregnancy until December came. Then, instead of preparing for the ceremony before the bishop, she had to reveal her condition to Mother Rosario. She was no longer a bride of Christ, but a future single mother, an immoral sinner, another whore of Babylon. The mother superior responded that California was far from Babylon and that they should face the situation with calm. She felt somewhat responsible, having sent the innocent girl out into the world, and she didn't have the heart to reprimand her too harshly. Molly had been abandoned and seen her honor stripped away, may God now take pity on her. She offered the girl some money from the alms box, and from among the clothes that had been donated for the poor she gave her a black skirt and severe white blouse with long sleeves and high collar. Molly bid farewell to the nuns with a promise to lead an irreproachable life and educate her future son or daughter

in the Catholic church. Then she went to seek comfort from her only friend, the director of Aztec Pride.

Don Pancho Claro had loved Molly from the moment he met her, but he transformed his initial attraction into companionship. He did not feel worthy of that young woman, half his age, destined for the church. Even though he'd seen her every day for three years, he hadn't noticed the recent changes in Molly's appearance because she was very thin and the novice's robes easily concealed her growing belly. It took him a moment to recognize her when she appeared dressed as an ordinary young woman, at that unexpected hour, and he did not notice her waistline until she confessed to him her situation.

"Death would be preferable! There is no place in this world for me now. What am I going to do?" Molly sobbed tragically.

"For the moment, nothing. Waiting is all you can do, Molly," don Pancho responded.

"How am I supposed to do that? I cannot return to the orphanage to offend the good sisters with this proof of my sin. I am out on the street!"

"Come live with me. My house is small, but there is a spare room for you. Things often have a way of working themselves out," he offered.

"Live with you? What would people say?"

"People will talk anyway, Molly. Unless, that is, you would do me the immense honor of marrying me." Don Pancho muttered the words so shyly that she thought she had misheard him, and the poor man had to repeat his proposal.

"Marry you, don Pancho? But I don't love you . . ."

"We have respect and affection for each other—that's a good start. Although I don't deserve you, maybe in time you might get to love me a little. I will not bother you with marital demands. We can help and accompany each other; being alone is very hard, Molly."

"And what about this?" she said, gesturing dramatically to her belly.

"I shall take responsibility for the child, you needn't worry about that."

"The person responsible is named Gonzalo Andrés del Valle and this baby will bear his name," she declared.

"Whatever for? That man has washed his hands of the situation," the professor argued.

"Because this baby has a claim to his fortune," she returned.

"That shan't be necessary, Molly. I may not have a fortune, but I can assure you that this baby boy or girl will want for nothing."

The couple was married the following week. Molly suggested that the ceremony be held in strict privacy, given the shame of her condition, but don Pancho thought it best to face the gossip head-on; a wedding without a celebration would be an affront to the community. He'd lived in that neighborhood for many years, he knew everyone there, had educated many of the children, was considered an arbiter of disputes and counselor in hard times. No one would ever forgive him for marrying in secret.

The neighbors cordoned off the street, hung multicolored banners, and prepared mounds of food. There was a thirty-ingredient mole, stuffed chiles, roasted baby goat, carnitas, enchiladas and tacos, pork pozole, piles of tortillas, both flour and corn. The entire neighborhood attended the celebration. The nuns, led by Mother Rosario, filed in bearing trays of cakes. There was horchata and fruit punch for the children and, for the adults, an unlimited supply of sotol, a Chihuahuan liquor that contains 50 percent alcohol, so strong it can be used to kill cockroaches and to numb the pain of surgery. The musicians played lively rancheras, jaranas, waltzes, and popular songs as the Mexicans and emigrants from other lands all danced joyously. After the festivities had ended, the street was strewn with rubbish and drunken revelers. Even the good sisters stumbled as they made their way back to the orphanage.

. . .

IN DUE TIME, Molly Walsh gave birth to a baby girl—me—and no one celebrated the event more joyfully than don Pancho Claro. "She's just like me!" they say he exclaimed when he saw me for the first time, and he wasn't wrong, because although physically we look nothing alike, we have many other things in common. I was christened with the name Emilia del Valle Claro in the local Mission District church. My mother insisted on including del Valle, but don Pancho wanted Claro to be my last name, because I wasn't just another bastard, I was the daughter he always wanted.

I never lamented the fact that my biological father abandoned me before I was born, because I had an excellent father, but that slippery Chilean man hovered in the air of my childhood like a pesky blowfly. Without my stepfather's cheerful sweetness, my mother would've surely poisoned my soul, unable as she was to get over the deception she'd endured, with my presence an all-too-frequent reminder. Even though she remained soft-spoken, with her childlike voice and her God-fearing scruples, she had hardened inside. I believe that she had always carried that iron core inside her but it had only manifested with the disillusion of that first betrayal. My mother is a very sensitive woman who takes everything personally, down to the wind and the rain, and over the years she has become sickly. She doesn't suffer from any real illness, but instead acquires symptoms of every disease she hears mentioned. This is how she has managed to pass unscathed through dysentery, cholera, and malaria, which does not exist in California, but which she read about as having decimated the British colonists in India.

One day when a spider bite left a red welt on her skin, I could not resist teasing her. "What you have is leprosy, Mama," I said to her.

"May God serve as witness that my own daughter mocks me! I shall sit in this chair and wait for all of Job's suffering to rain down upon me!" she exclaimed with a certain underlying sarcasm.

Since then, we remind her of Job whenever she becomes overly dramatic and that generally quiets her down. She suffers from mi-

graines, which are not imaginary, and she has a delicate stomach due to the extreme fasting of her youth, but it does not diminish her energy and willingness to work. My mother never rests. She wears dark, simple clothing, never adorning herself with accessories or applying rouge to her cheeks, as current fashion dictates; if it were not for the care she dedicates to her hair, she would look just like the nun she always wanted to be. Living with don Pancho, the agnostic anarchist, has somewhat attenuated her Catholic fanaticism, but he has not been able to cure her of it entirely.

At that time, Aztec Pride was the only school with classes in Spanish and it was the heart of the neighborhood; in some ways, it still is. Molly shared her husband's responsibilities when it came to teaching and charity, in addition to taking care of the domestic chores, because don Pancho is a wise man who feeds on ideas and can't be bothered with prosaic matters, as she says. The true reason is that he doesn't have a hint of practical sense. When tasked with frying two eggs, don Pancho will waste ten minutes over the frying pan musing aloud on the clichéd philosophical question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. Molly does not have the patience for that.

ALTHOUGH I WILL never know the details of my mother and her husband's intimacy, because that's one of the few topics that I would not dare touch with them, I am guessing they were chaste for a long time. At the beginning, Molly's trauma, her pregnancy, and motherhood came between them. During the first five years of my life, I slept in my mother's bed in the main bedroom while my Papo used a cot in the little room. I think they didn't have a normal marriage, although they cared dearly for each other; people commented that they were an ideal couple. He has always been very kind, indulgent, and generous with my mother, and she reserved her coquetry and her jesting only for him. This woman, so serious in public, becomes a playful girl when she is alone with her husband. He had always been

in love with her, and in due time the affection that she felt for him evolved naturally into love and maybe passion.

One day they announced that I was old enough to sleep alone and without much ado they moved me to the room that had belonged to my stepfather. In turn, he took my place in my mother's bed. I am sure that all that waiting was worthwhile. In spite of their many differences, don Pancho and Molly have remained in love like newlyweds. As was to be expected, our family grew and I soon had three brothers.

Before having her other children, my mother visited the elderly, sat with the sick, helped abandoned women and widows. She still gets up every day at dawn to bake bread for the beggars and attend the first morning mass before moving on to all her other obligations. Don Pancho's small house, built on the same lot as the school, initially consisted of three half-empty rooms, which Molly quickly transformed into a cozy home. She climbed up on a ladder to paint the house inside and out, knitted blankets and sewed curtains, then planted a flower garden and several fruit trees. She has always been the one who raised money to fund the school and the natural administrator of all the family finances. Since her husband is better at giving money away, she has him on a monthly allowance that barely covers his cigarettes. Scrimping and saving, Molly was able to buy furniture and add on to the house, building a kitchen, a living room, and a covered porch to sit on in the evenings.

Despite my mother's taxing nature, her real and imagined maladies, her quickness to judge, her tendency toward tragedy, and her sullen silences, her husband adores her and still considers himself fortunate that she conceded to marry him. In his eyes, Molly will always be the beautiful youth of seventeen who came to teach at Aztec Pride; she has never changed. Even though she is almost twenty years his junior, the difference is hardly noticeable because she has aged prematurely while, for him, the clock seems to have stopped. I can verify this because I have seen their wedding photo and now, more than

twenty years later, Papo looks no different, his teeth stained from tobacco, a full head of hair, black mustache, and the same mischievous smile. From him I get my optimistic nature. I inherited very little, however, from my mother, not her glossy black hair, her pearly skin, or her lapis lazuli eyes, only her height, which has served to keep anyone from ever being able to look down on me. I have dark eyes and brown hair.

I have always known that Francisco Claro is not my father, but that is a minor, abstract detail, because he has been the best father I could've wished for. No one has ever loved me as much as that short, mustachioed teacher, my Papo. He had three sons with my mother, but I was raised as an only child for eight years before my brothers were born. In that time, I received all of his attention and love. I have always been his favorite—the apple of his eye, as he calls me when he gets sentimental, something that happens often. According to him, he can spoil me like a princess because I am his little girl, whereas the boys must be raised with a firm hand to ensure that they shall grow into good men. He never let my mother hit me, but he has accepted corporal punishment as the most effective means of keeping my brothers in line.

"You spoil Emilia rotten! The little brat believes we are here to wait on her hand and foot, incapable of doing anything for herself. I pray she contracts scabies, so she may learn to scratch her own self, at least," my mother often said.

2

WHILE SPANISH WAS THE LANGUAGE OF MY EARLY YEARS, most people born in the United States end up speaking English. I was educated at Aztec Pride, like many of the boys in my neighborhood, but my culture and my self-assurance were inculcated in me by don Pancho Claro during every moment of our life together. He also gave me my insatiable curiosity, which has been my driving force since very early on. According to my mother—from whom I inherited strength and tenacity—curiosity is a liability in a woman: It leads to misfortune. She often said that curiosity kills the mouse, and if I ever got in trouble, my stepfather was to blame. This characteristic of mine has taken many forms over the years, but in essence it has kept me always looking around the next corner or over the horizon.

Whereas other kids played ball or jumped rope, I entertained myself by absorbing anything and everything my Papo felt like teaching me, from the contents of the dictionary and his scientific texts to cards and dancing, which he said were good ways to make friends. To this day, now that I'm a grown woman with my own life, we are close friends, I tell him my secrets; we share books and magazines; comment on the news, which is always bad; go walking in nature to iden-

tify plants and birds; visit museums, the theater, and, sometimes, when a touring company visits from New York or Europe, go to the opera. My mother, always busy with her younger children, her chores, and her charity work, rarely participates in our activities, except when it comes to plotting crimes.

While it's true that my Papo doesn't indulge in any of the common vices, he has one weakness that I share as well: dime novels. Everyone is familiar with these little books, popularized during the Civil War, around ninety to a hundred pages in length, pocket-sized, printed on cheap paper with hastily written stories about cowboys and Indians, adventurers, and soldiers, easy to read and entertaining. Critics consider them garbage for the semi-illiterate, but in reality, they fill a space in the life of many ordinary people, especially men and boys, since most women don't have the time to read and the upper-class ladies of leisure prefer poetry and romance. My Papo collects these novels and I've devoured every single one in his library. At age seventeen I got the idea to contribute to the collection.

"What do you think of me writing dime novels, Papo?" I suggested one day.

"How do you plan to do that, princess?"

"It's easy. Murder, jealousy, cruelty, ambition, hatred . . . you know, Papo, the same as in the Bible or the opera."

"You're quite young for all that."

"I won't lose anything by trying. Will you help me?" I asked.

I had been working with him at the school for a few years by that point, because my mother was too busy with my brothers, but, although I wanted to help ease my Papo's workload, I don't have the talent for teaching; I'm too impatient. He accepted my help gratefully, but suggested I develop another skill. He said I needed a profession that would allow me to support myself and do whatever I pleased, without depending on a husband or anyone else. My mother believed that any woman who worked to make a living would end up in pov-

erty, since we were paid so little, and she added that Papo wanted me to become an old maid so that I would never leave him. She was almost certainly right.

If it was a diploma I was after, she suggested nursing, whereas Papo insisted I should become a doctor. There were already a few women in the field of medicine, graduates from the University of California. But pain and blood, wounds and death, things I've put to such good use in my dime novels, don't interest me in real life. I couldn't imagine at that point that destiny had reserved a healthy dose of them for me.

THAT'S HOW I began my career in letters, if I can call my work by that name. In the dime novels I found an outlet for my desire to explore beyond my limited reality. Through writing I could go anywhere and do anything I wanted. My Papo tried to help me, but, curiously, it was my mother who imagined the plot of my first book: A young woman is ravaged by a band of heartless criminals who end up paying for the misdeed with their lives. Nothing too original, except that the vengeance isn't dealt out by a hero with a chiseled jawline and perfect aim, but by the girl herself, who dresses up as a man to kill the four evildoers, one by one, in the most brutal way.

We'd never seen my mother so excited about anything; the gorier and bloodier the details, the happier she seemed. Melodrama fits my mother like a glove. I think that sending those four felons down into hell was her way of vicariously punishing her one-time seducer, Gonzalo Andrés del Valle. She even suggested that the damsel castrate her rapists before murdering them, but I worried that might be too much for my potential male readers. Men are very squeamish when it comes to their private parts.

My Papo polished up the manuscript for me, I translated it into English, and then he personally took it to an editor, because I would have been ignored completely. *The Damsel's Revenge* was published

under the name Brandon J. Price simultaneously in English and in Spanish, to compete with the novels that came in from Mexico.

The excitement over seeing my first book in print was indescribable; I've never felt that way about any book I've published since. Upon opening the brown paper package to find the ten copies sent by the editor, I began crying like a little girl. My Papo wanted to invite the entire neighborhood to celebrate, but I reminded him that we couldn't reveal Brandon J. Price's true identity. We'd spent hours coming up with the most macho name we could think of before finally landing on my pseudonym, which was a secret that my brothers, all under age nine, would have to keep. Unable to throw a party, Papo decided to mark the occasion with special gifts for my mother and me. He bought his wife a pair of gold filigree-and-garnet earrings and for me a gold medallion with the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, both pieces of jewelry in the purest Mexican style.

That summer they sold nine thousand copies of the book in English across the country and twenty-nine hundred Spanish copies in Texas and California. When the publishing house asked for another novel, I already had one ready, thanks to my enthusiasm for writing and my mother's morbid imagination. The second book was called *A Bad Woman* and the protagonist was the same defiled damsel from the first novel, now devoted to avenging other wronged women. Many more dime novels followed, along with weekly serials in the newspapers, as Brandon J. Price made a name for himself. I tried to expand my repertoire to romances for the female readership, but in this genre I was unsuccessful. The formula was simple enough, consisting of variations on the theme of love laden with obstacles between a good, poor girl and a rich, noble boy disenchanted with love. But since the editors demanded that virtue and morality triumph in the end, I was never able to get sufficiently inspired. My mother also had trouble coming up with convincing plot lines, always more inclined toward tragedy than romance.

. . .

THE "BAD WOMAN" from my book's title was a joke within our family. My mother raised me with the strict Catholic morals that the nuns had instilled in her: sins, contrition, guilt, heaven, purgatory, hell, and when her husband would intervene in my favor to soften the rules, she would cut him off with the argument that they should be trying to shape me into a good woman. That would put an end to the discussion. She never clarified what being a good woman consisted of exactly, but it seemed to be the traditional idiot who submits to rules imposed by others. One day, in the midst of a tantrum, I shouted that I wanted to be a bad woman. I was six years old at the time. It's the only real mutiny that I remember from childhood; my true acts of rebellion came later, when the two protuberances appeared above my ribs and the hair between my legs. My mother invoked God as her witness and raised a sandal in the air, but my Papo managed to hold her back. My dear stepfather used that scene to mock the notion of a "good woman" and he did so with such eloquence that my mother had to admit that on certain occasions it was better to be a bad woman, while never making a fuss, of course, no need to cause a commotion.

The revenue from my literary ventures, which have always been successful, served to contribute to the household income and to my savings, which my mother considers sacred. "Given that you don't have a husband, and at the rate you're going I doubt you ever will, you must save for your future," she often says to me.

She and I support the family, me with my books and other writings, she with her common sense, thrifty nature, and hard work. The bread for the poor, which Molly Walsh had been baking out of charity for many years, eventually became a domestic industry. She had two brick ovens built in the patio to bake bread of all kinds, both salty and sweet, first on her own and then with the help of a couple of girls from the neighborhood. Every morning, even Sundays, there's a line of customers waiting for her baked goods. And every morning I wake

up to the comforting vision of my mother and her two assistants kneading dough and the incomparable smell of fresh-baked bread steaming beneath white towels as it cools on the wooden countertop. What she doesn't sell in the morning, she gives away to the poor, who have dubbed her Saint Molly, never suspecting that this was her childhood nickname.

My mother maintains that it's not enough to earn money, you have to know how to manage it, especially in the case of a woman, because people will always try to fool us, pay us less, or rob us, and if we get married, everything passes into our husband's hands. She doesn't have that problem, because my Papo would never even think to ask her for the money that she earns or question how she manages it. He knows that if it weren't for his wife's efforts and good sense, we'd be much poorer. He isn't interested in what I earn either; it's my mother who keeps our accounts.

At the time of this writing, my Papo still works at the school, even though he's a few years shy of seventy and at his age most men are either dead or nodding off in a wicker rocker chewing at the air. He spends his time studying, reading, and thinking, unconcerned with more mundane matters. He never asks for anything, as long as he has his cigarettes. My mother says that his grasshopper personality keeps him young, whereas she's more like the ant in the story, always working and saving, which is why she has wrinkles and gray hair.

BETWEEN HELPING MY Papo at the school and writing novels filled with action and blood, the years slipped by. I was about to turn twenty-three when I began working as a columnist for a newspaper. *The Daily Examiner* was the new name of a paper that had previously supported slavery and had therefore been prohibited in don Pancho's home. After President Lincoln's assassination, the newspaper office was attacked by a furious mob that destroyed the building. Since then, its political inclinations have changed along with its name.

It was then acquired by a mining magnate who gave it its current name; it is said that he won it in a game of poker. When I found out that the newspaper had passed into the hands of that impresario's son, a young man named William Randolph Hearst, I got up the nerve to request a meeting with him, because he was known for his modern ideas and he was hiring illustrators and writers my Papo and I read, such as Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, and Mark Twain. Hearst was an ambitious man who dreamed of creating a press empire, a chain of newspapers across the most important cities in the country.

I figured that somewhere in that empire, there might be a place for me. I was beginning to grow bored with classes at the Aztec Pride and dime novels; I wanted to open myself up to the real world and all that it actually held, instead of only dreaming up stories about it.

I wasn't able to speak with Hearst himself, of course, but after much insistence, clarifying that I didn't want a job as a typist but as a journalist, the editor in chief agreed to meet with me.

A glass wall divided his office from the newsroom, where a dozen reporters worked in a haze of cigarette smoke to a thundering concert of typewriters, telephones, telegraphs, and voices. Mr. Chamberlain was a man with a long career in journalism, energetic and impatient, who had granted me exactly ten minutes, the receptionist informed me. He remained standing, prepared to dismiss me in five, but we are the same height and as we stood there face-to-face he found it difficult to intimidate me. My Papo had instilled in me great self-confidence from a young age. "Remember that you're more intelligent than everybody else," he would tell me often. Also, I'd spent several years publishing books and had a good deal more writing experience than most of those boys mashing at the keyboards out in the newsroom.

"We don't have any female reporters," Chamberlain announced by way of greeting.

"That's why I'm here, sir. Your newspaper needs me," I answered.